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AN ACCOUNT OF
ABIMELECH COODY
AND OTHER
CELEBRATED WRITERS
OF NEW YORK.

AN ACCOUNT OF
ABIMELECH COODY

AND OTHER

CELEBRATED WRITERS

OF NEW YORK:

IN A LETTER FROM A TRAVELLER

TO

HIS FRIEND IN SOUTH CAROLINA;

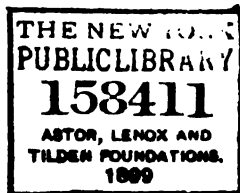
JANUARY, 1815.

By

DeWitt Clinton

14

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ROY W. H.
1864
Y. A. G. L.

NEW YORK, January 11, 1815.

Dear Sir :

Literary excellence has its favourites whom it selects to bless with its benign influence, and to adorn with its highest honours. It is not confined to a particular spot, nor is it bounded by degrees of latitude. It wanders over the earth in search of superior minds, and whenever it finds ethereal intelligence, it applies the hand of cultivation, and produces a harvest of instruction and amusement for the benefit of mankind. In some favoured places, nature seems to have put forth her utmost strength, and to have produced prodigies of genius, and miracles of learning; and it has been remarked, that after this she has been in a state of exhaustion for a long period of time, and that her offspring are correspondent. Athens was at one period, the great school of philosophy and learning, which enlightened the human race. This intellectual supremacy was after the lapse of many centuries, transferred to Rome. After a long night, it was revived under the Medici in Italy. In the reign of Louis XIV of France and of Queen Anne of Great Britain, constellations of great minds appeared resplendent in the literary heavens. Philadelphia has

for a long time claimed to be the Athens of America, Connecticut has also for many years arrogated to herself similar honours. She has produced a plentiful crop of poets, who have aspired to be wits of the Western World, and the venerable Morse has not hesitated to award to her the palm of superior excellence. But while these Literary Colossuses were striving for pre-eminence, the star of New York was seen in the distant horizon, illuminating as it ascended to the Meridian, and finally astonishing the world by its superior lustre and effulgence. Previous to my visit to this celebrated city, fame had not been idle in trumpeting forth the praises of its wits and literary worthies. My expectations were raised to the highest pitch ; and I fully anticipated in the feast of reason, and the flow of soul, those intellectual pleasures which elevate man in the scale of creation. Under this impression, I entered this renowned Metropolis. Now says I, I am on classic ground ; on ground trodden by the Knickerbockers and Coodies, and the far famed authors of the History of All Nations ; of the Beau and the Salmagundi, and of the Analectic Magazine, and of the Magazine of Wonders. Perhaps on this very spot, Coody cherished his sublime ideas ; perhaps on this ground the great poet who sung so melodiously the lay of the Scottish Fiddle, courted the heavenly muse. And when I

entered my chamber, may be, thought I, this very room has been visited by the great geniuses that have produced the three great magazines, the New York Magazine, the Analectic Magazine, and the Magazine of Wonders. If so, sacred be the place ! may poetry deck, and eloquence adorn it with their choicest flowers. I was so agitated with these feelings that sleep was in a great degree a stranger to my pillow. I was disturbed in my slumbers by apparitions flitting before me, clothed in the costume of Apollo and the Muses. Coody approached me in the darkness of night, surrounded with haloes of glory. He was a tall man with an angelic countenance ; the genius of symmetry had moulded his limbs, and a more than mortal brightness beamed from his eyes of fire. As I reached forth my hand to welcome the splendid vision, it vanished from my embrace, and I woke in all the bitterness of disappointment.

The next morning I sallied forth to gather intelligence, and to see the literary wonders of the great City. I went to the book stores and to the literary rooms, and I even obtained introduction to some of the celebrated authors. The result of my inquiries I shall now communicate to you in as succinct a form as possible.

I found that New York formed in more respects

than one, a singular exception to the general state of things in America. Almost in every other place men write for amusement, or for fame; but here there are authors by profession, who make it a business and a living. This profession is not extensive, but it makes up in celerity its numerical deficiencies. And its usefulness in course of time, will render its votaries as acceptable to the public as they now are to themselves.

At the head of the list is a venerable old gentleman from Scotland. He has published more books than any other writer in New York. His *History of Man and of All Nations* are curious, and are pronounced by good judges to contain more solid information than the *History of New York* by Knickerbocker. His *Mental Flower Garden* is a very agreeable present to young persons; and his *Magazine of Wonders* has a more extensive circulation than any other periodical performance. This worthy old gentleman sometimes sacrifices to the muses, and indeed it is believed that the *Lay of the Scottish Fiddle* owes some of its best lines to his munificence.

The next writer is also from Scotland; he is an excellent classical scholar, and has published a *Latin Grammar*, and some improved editions of the *School Classics*. He has also been concerned in

writing for Low's Encyclopedia. He has given to the world four large octavoes on American Biography ; has written a history of the Yellow Fever, and lately edited the New York Magazine. It is to be regretted that he has retired altogether from literary lucubrations, and has devoted himself to the science of arms.

I have been introduced to a gentleman whose original profession was that of an iron monger. He has recently become a counsellor at law. I have not heard of any original writings proceeding from his pen, except a philippic against the celebrated orator Ogilvie, wherein he inveighs most severely against Democracy, and lashes the Republican party with more fury than Xerxes lashed the Hellespont. His intimate friendship and relationship with Abimelech Coody the Lady's Shoemaker, has introduced him to the Society of the Cordwainers; in consequence of which he was appointed as one of that body to deliver an Oration before the congregated Patriotic Societies on the 4th of July, which he performed as I am told to general satisfaction. It has given me great regret that I have not been able to procure a sight of this celebrated production. On the same day a great statesman and orator, Gouverneur Morris, delivered a speech before the Washington Benevolent Society. I have seen

a very able criticism on the Cordwainer's Oration attributed to the author himself, in which he has instituted a comparison between it and the oration of Mr. Morris. It is unnecessary to state that he pronounces his to be as superior in genius and execution as it is in public spirit; and it instantly reminded me of Plutarch's celebrated parallel between Demosthenes and Cicero.

I have, indeed, heard it sneeringly objected to his discourse that the scent of the original cask still remained about the author, and that his ironmongery education, like Sancho's key, which gave the whole butt of wine a chalybeate taste, has infected the purity of his style; for that he has unwittingly animated his countrymen by the sound of the *kettle* instead of the drum, and has armed them with the *spade* and the *pick-axe*, instead of the sword and the musquet.

This gentleman has further distinguished himself by translations from the French. It is to be regretted that he is disqualified by the defect of his education from drinking the Pierian springs of classic lore. But he has endeavored to atone for his deficiency by making great progress in Spanish and High Dutch, and he and Coody by uniting their legal honours have made one lawyer; so it is to be hoped that by clubbing their attainments in lan-

guage, they may produce one accomplished scholar. His face is rather vacant, but the interior of his hands still display the marks of laborious contact with hard substances.

Incongruous as the association between the cultivation of ironmongery and literature may appear, yet it is no less true, that another celebrated author by profession, was originally concerned in a hardware store, and it is believed is still a sleeping partner. He was also brought up to the law; but like Blackstone and Jones he preferred the inspiration of the muse to an intimate acquaintance with Bracton and Fleta, Spelman and Littleton: he has wisely determined that another Ovid should not in another Murray be lost: he has taken the road which leads to Mount Parnassus instead of following the drudgery of the law, and has become the salaried editor of a Magazine.

Although his *Salmagundi* is upon a threadbare plan yet its execution exhibits some strong traits of humour, and some fine flashes of imagination. The history of New York by Knickerbocker, independently of its broad humour, is really intolerable. The heterogeneous and unnatural combination of fiction and history is perfectly disgusting to good taste. Such delineaments of human nature are like likenesses in wax work; you neither see the

chisel of Phidias, nor the pencil of Appelles; but the rough delineations of the untutored savage. The resemblance may be great, but it is nature without life, character without expression, and it exhibits art without exciting interest. In reading such productions the mind is continually tortured between the real and the fabulous, and they resemble the works of the painter who should unite the neck of a horse to a human head.

There is no doubt but that this gentleman possesses a rich imagination. He has however expended the energy of his mind in producing ridiculous combinations, in hunting after quaint expressions, and in plundering from the stores of Le Sage and Cervantes, Rabelais and Scarron, Fielding and Smollet. As to real talent and learning his mind is a *tabula rasa*; he cannot read any of the classics in their original language; nor does he know the first elements of any science. I have spent one evening in his company, and I find him barren in conversation, and very limited in information. His physiognomy is intelligent, and I should upon the whole, think favourably of him had he not attempted to play the Joe Miller at a great man's table.

Next to him may be ranked Dr. Henry, the author of a New and Complete American Family Herbal, illustrated with elegant engravings. Of

this elaborate and highly scientific work, honorable mention is made in that repository of sound criticism, the *Analectic Magazine*. It appears that the Doctor is a great traveller, and that he has been thirty years a prisoner among the Creeks. His mind is deeply stored with anecdote and lore, and next to Coody he is the most splendid star in the galaxy of New York Authors.

I have also seen a tall bow-bent young gentleman who has attained universal reputation as a writer. He is deeply read in the history of the heathen gods, and this I believe is the full extent of his classical knowledge. His late reply to Southey's review of *Inchiquin's Letters*, is a well meant, although not ably executed refutation of malignant calumny. It was not necessary for him to exhibit so much knowledge of mythology; and when he pronounced the philosopher, who

"Eripuit cœlo fulmen, sceptrumque tyrannis"

as the Jupiter Tonans of this Western World, he certainly ruined his reputation as a man of discrimination and taste; nor was it proper for him to make a parade of learning which he never possessed, and of books which he never saw. His affectation of reading reminds me of Pope's lines in the *Dunciad*:

From me, what Virgil, Pliny may deny,
Manilius or Solinus shall supply.

His parody on Scott is utterly destitute of the spirit of poetry. When with his magic pen, he converts inns into castles, tavern keepers into barons bold, and rustic lasses into high born damsels, we are reminded of the exploits of the knight of the rueful countenance.

But let us ascend to superior characters. I understand that the wits of New York had established a Button's Coffee House, in the celebrated Mead House near the intersection of Pine and William streets, and I often attempted to gain admittance into their sanctum sanctorum, but I unfortunately never could succeed. This was a kind of literary free masonry, which shut its doors against the profane; but their enemies did not scruple to assert that this exclusion was intended to conceal the poverty of their knowledge, and their want of conversation talents, and at the same time to envelope themselves in mysterious importance, and I have heard them more than once compared to the Ugly Club, which, as it is composed of the handsomest young gentlemen in the city, so the Club of professed wits is said to be made up of the greatest dunces that could be selected. But I was determined not to make up a definite opinion until I could gain access to the celebrated Abimelech Coody, and after finding him as difficult to approach as the phi-

losopher of Ferney, I at length had the pleasure of seeing him. I was certainly struck with his singular appearance, and I immediately pronounced him an extraordinary character. He arose from his chair when I was announced, and did not approach me in a direct line, but in a side-long way, or diagonally, or in a kind of echellon movement. This immediately reminded me of Linnæus' character of a dog, which he says always inclines his tail to the left. He held his head down, and did not look me in the face. This I at first attributed to the diffidence of a retired student, but I no sooner had a full view of him, than I instantly saw

The Proud Parnassian sneer,
The conscious simper and the jealous leer.

His whole person is squat and clumsy, and reminds you of the figure called by children *Humpy Dumpy on the wall*. A nervous tremor was concentrated at the lower end of each nostril, which must have arisen from his habitual sneering and carping at everything. If I had not entertained an exalted idea of his intellect, I should have supposed that his sensorium had been transferred from his head to his nose, and I was often tempted to say, prithee, dont look with that violent and inflexible wise face, like Solomon at the dividing of the child, in an old piece of tapestry. I found him dry

and reserved: although perfectly polite I could not allure him into conversation, and I therefore determined to look into his writings before I pronounced him,

A wit with dunces; and a dunce with wits.

In the first place I was referred to an oration before the Washington Benevolent Society; this I found like all other holiday political discourses, common place, and virulent, without any solidity of thought, or depth of research, and with very little pretensions to eloquence. Besides, I could never think a work like this a criterion by which to pronounce upon the merits of a literary character.

I was next referred to the biographical works of this great man; he was described to me as a second Plutarch or Johnson in Biography. With this favorable impression I looked into several pieces in the *Analectic Magazine* signed V, and I was much disappointed to find that they were principally stolen from Hardee and Eliot, and varnished up in a new style. Now and then the author elaborates a profound thought, but it has all the appearance of hard labor, and like straining out the last dull dropping of his sense. In some places he sins most egregiously against grammar and style. Take for instance, his life of Cadwalader Colden; it opens in the following pompous sentence:

"There is nothing which can afford a more sure indication of the growth of national feeling, and the consequent formation of a more definite national character among us, than that curiosity and interest which has been of late so strongly manifested with respect to the history, anecdote, and humble antiquities of our provincial annals."

We have heard of the annals of history, but never of the history of annals, and the anecdote of annals is a still more rare occurrence. Abimelech Coody's Letter on Banks is also considered a great performance; and truly if it ever excites laughter, it must be at the nonsense, not at the wit which it contains. It is not enlivened with a single ray of genius, or spark of wit, and the writer never more egregiously mistook his talents, than supposing himself endowed with powers for satire.

I believe I have remarked upon all the works of the imperial wit of New York, commonly called Abimelech Coody, and I must candidly say, that I never met with a man pretending to be a great literary character who has done so little either as respects the quality or the quantity of his performances. In justice to him however it must be admitted that he possesses more knowledge than his brother wits, and this he may indeed have, and yet his acquisitions may be very scanty and limited.

It is believed that he skims like a swallow over the surface of science, and that he may be properly arranged in that order of sciolists who

“Commas and points they set exactly right,
And twere a sin to rob them of their mite.”

In order to have a full view of this great man, it is necessary to state that he was bred a lawyer, but his first grand exhibition in life was that of a rioter in a church; that he personated a Lady's shoemaker; that he has finally settled down into a magazine writer for money, and into a Captain of Sea Fencibles for money; and that he has become the head of a political sect called the Coodies, of a hybrid nature, composed of the combined spawn of federalism and jacobinism, and generated in the venomous passions of disappointment and revenge, without any definite character; neither fish nor flesh; bird nor beast; animal nor plant, but a non-descript made up of

All monstrous, all prodigious things
Abominable, unutterable and worse than
Fable yet has feigned or Fear conceived;
Gorgons and Hydras and Chimeras dire.

This account indeed would be a very unfair specimen of the literature and talents of New York. It is but due to justice to state, that this city contains in its bosom, men of as great attainments in

various knowledge, and of as high professional standing as any place in the world. Several of those gentlemen have united into a society, called the Historical, whose name describes its object; and into another association, called the *Literary and Philosophical Society*; similar establishments, as the last exist in South Carolina, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and Connecticut, and in Massachusetts there is also an Historical and Antiquarian Society. In order to extend their usefulness and to acquire information from distant parts, these associations frequently admit distinguished persons from other States, as honorary and corresponding members. They have been all patronized by State governments, and some of them have been favourably noticed by the general government. They are proud monuments of the zeal for knowledge and science which pervades the United States; and the names of their founders and patrons, will be transmitted with honour to posterity. One would think that it would require more than Corinthian brass to attack such institutions with ridicule or with seriousness. They certainly accumulate many important facts, and furnish the grounds of many useful inventions. They have been encouraged in all enlightened countries, and patronized by all patriotic governments. They combine the most public spirited and best informed

men of the nation, without reference to party or sect; and at all events, they produce well meant, and in most cases successful attempts to enlighten man, and to improve society.

The literary striplings of whom I have spoken, have made an attack upon these institutions, in their great work called the *Analectic Magazine*. Without any comments on the modesty which dictated this measure, and the matchless intrepidity of face, which must distinguish such very young and very ignorant men, in thus dashing their venom in the faces of their superiors, it is sufficient to remark that their combined production is as remarkable for its want of point, and dearth of talent, as it is for its wanton abuse, and its flagitious disregard of truth. The strength of the attack and the burden of the song, consists in falsely representing the institution of these associations, and their distant extension, as the offspring of avidity for literary honours; not as the effect of a desire to increase the stock of human knowledge. The motives which produced this miserable abortion of malignity, this fruit of dull heat, and sooterkin of wit, are various and I shall briefly relate the predominant ones.

They had heard that some of the wits in England, had attacked the Royal Society; that Swift, Pope,

and Arbuthnot, that illustrious triumvirate had sometimes amused themselves with the Philosophers of the day; and that even one of them had said,

“And shine in all the dignity of F. R. S.”

Now as Swift, Pope and Arbuthnot, had attacked the Philosophical Society of Great Britain, ergo, Coody, Knickerbocker, and Scottish Fiddle ought to attack the Philosophical Societies of the United States. The wits of New York must do as the wits of Great Britain had done before, or they would not indicate their inherited blood, and would be out of the right line of descent. It is impossible that they can obtain distinction even if they gain admittance into the learned associations; their information is so scanty, and their intellects so feeble, that it is utterly out of their power to pursue any considerable train of investigation, or to arrive at any important scientific deductions. Of Coody it may be said that he has a great appetite for learning, without any digestion; but the others have neither appetite nor digestion. Like insects who buzz about the lamp of science, they may sometimes obscure its rays by their puny wings, but they can never increase its effulgence nor continue its lustre. It is the invariable quality of little minds, to depreciate that excellence which they cannot reach, and

to destroy that superiority which they cannot attain—When Coody and his associates endeavour to attach ridicule to knowledge, and to throw science in the back ground, it is because they can never aspire to any distinguished rank in the walks of literature. They satirize literary titles because *they* are not so honoured; and they abuse literary institutions, because they are there exhibited in their diminutive size.

With respect to Coody, I have recently had a piece of information which will serve as an additional clue to his conduct. Avarice and revenge appear to be two prominent traits in his character. In Hall's Law Journal, vol. IV, I have met with a charge of the honourable De Witt Clinton, Mayor of the City of New York, in a case of a riot. It appears that Coody and seven others, were indicted for a riot in a church. The authorities of the College had refused a degree to one of the students, on account of contumacy. Coody and his associates insisted that the degree should be conferred, and they interrupted the exercises of the day, and created a scene of confusion and uproar, which essentially disturbed the solemnity and most flagrantly violated the respect due to the holy place. The Mayor in speaking of Coody's conduct, thus expressed himself:—He too must be regarded as one

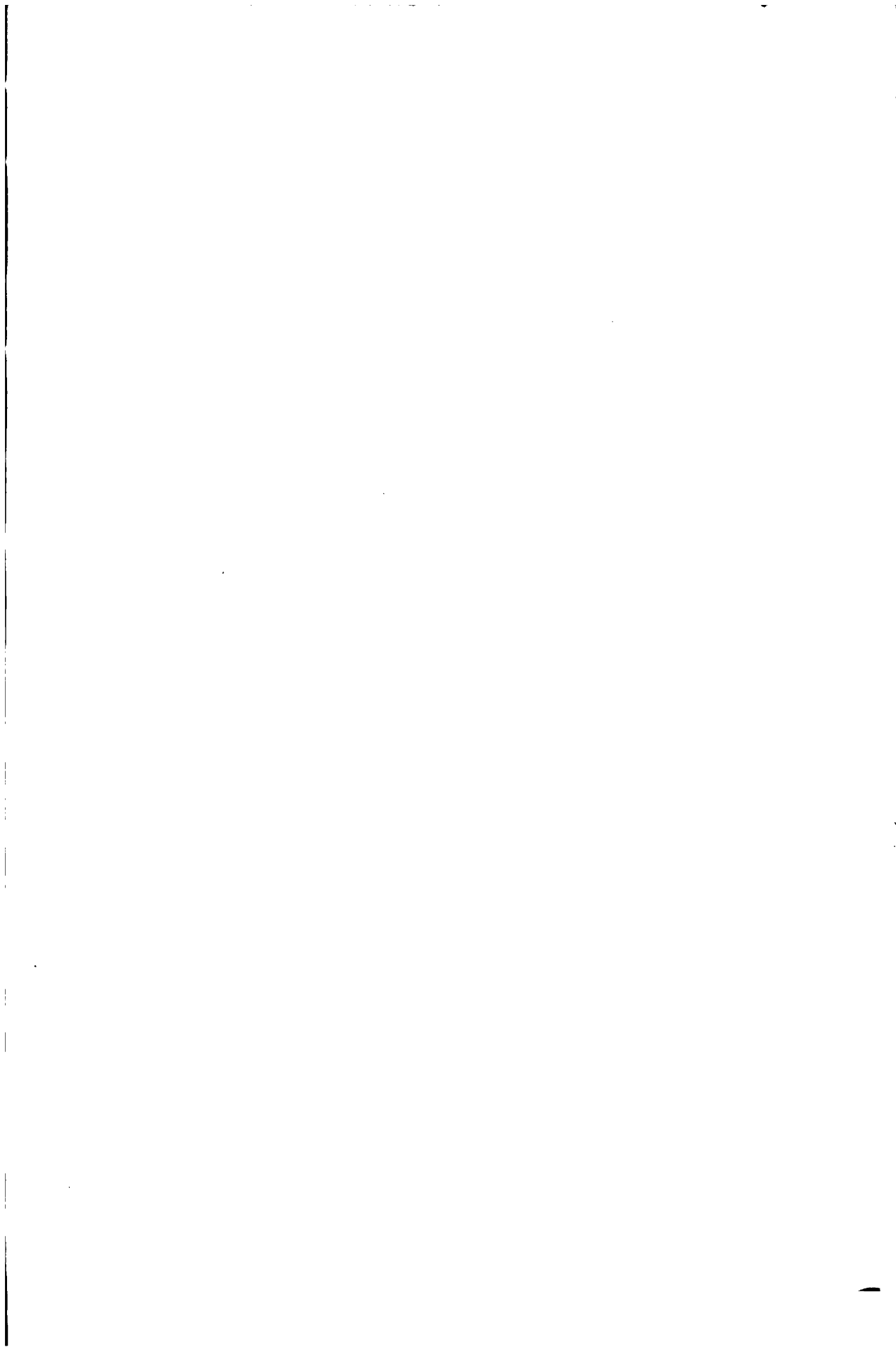
of the ringleaders of this disorder and disgrace. It is difficult to speak in terms sufficiently strong, of his reprehensible conduct. A young man of his age to have the boldness to mount the stage, and insolently demand of the Provost the causes of his conduct; and then shaping himself into all the importance of an umpire, to exclaim, "Mr. Maxwell must be supported." And afterwards to move that the thanks of the meeting be given to Mr. Maxwell, for his spirited defence of an injured man—"evinces a matchless insolence." Coody was convicted and instead of being sent to prison as he ought to have been, he was let off with a fine and a severe reprimand. Since that time he has like Hannibal on the altar, sworn revenge, and he regulates his ideas of men and things by Mr. Clinton's opinions, always exhibiting himself in opposition. Mr. Clinton among his other great qualifications, is distinguished for a marked devotion to science; few men have read more and few men can claim more various and extensive knowledge; and the bounties of nature have been improved by persevering and unremitting industry. It was natural that such men should have high rank in literary institutions; and he was accordingly elected the first President of the Literary and Philosophical Society of New York. Coody of course points his venomous arrows at that institution.

The Royal Society has survived the satire of Pope, and the wit of Butler, and it is to be hoped that the literary institutions of America, will exist and flourish when Coody and Knickerbocker have joined the Thersites of former times. We may smile at the tricks of the monkey, the sallies of the buffoon, and the repartees of the jester; but we attach no solid respect to their exhibitions. A sick lion may be kicked even by an ass; but an institution established upon the broad basis of public utility, by honorable and high-minded men, for the purpose of extending the empire of science, can never experience the fate of Actæon, and be destroyed by *puppies*.

I am yours, with regard,

THE TRAVELLER.

Wm. J. P.



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